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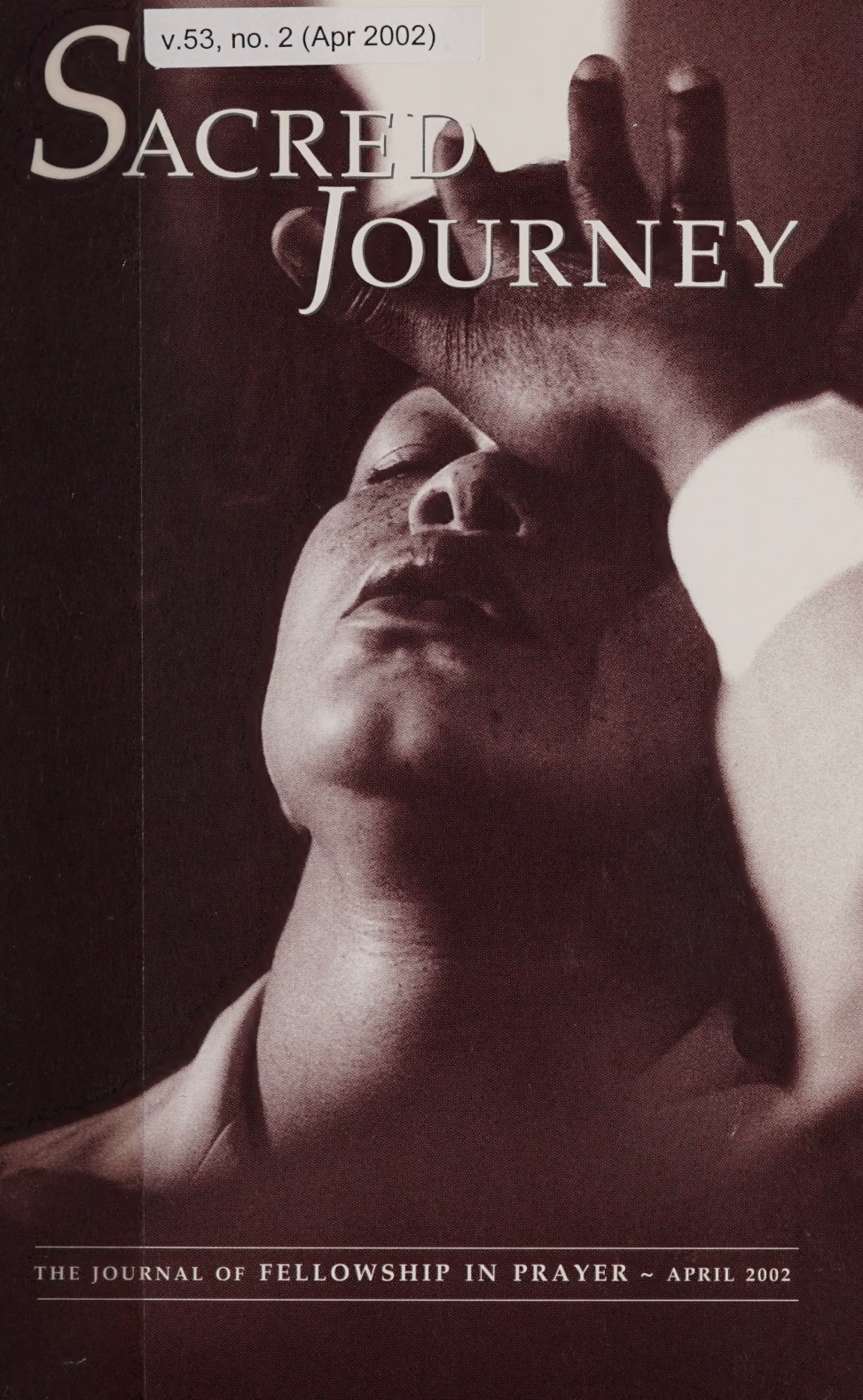
SACRED JOURNEY



THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ APRIL 2002

SACRED JOURNEY®

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is

to encourage and support

a spiritual orientation to life,

to promote the practice of

prayer,

meditation,

and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit of unity

among humankind.

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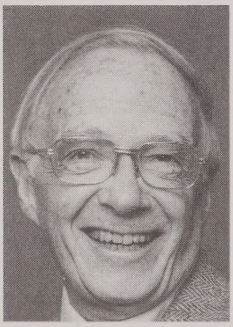
Cover photo by Abraham Menashe.

LOOKING FORWARD TO MEETING YOU



We'll be seeing you soon, we hope, at Fellowship in Prayer's second major "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference in Princeton, N.J. As most of you know, this joyous interfaith conference, celebrating love, compassion, and spiritual wisdom, will take place in the serene beauty of the Princeton University campus Friday, Saturday, and Sunday–June 14, 15, and 16.

Rabbi Marcia Prager will start us off with a dynamic kabbalat shabbat service Friday night. The keynote speaker Saturday morning will be Dr. Gerald ("Jerry") May, Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation's "eloquent guide to spiritual self-awareness," followed by eighteen workshops (including those by Jerry May and Joan Borysenko). If you register right away, you still have a good chance of getting your first two choices: one for the morning, a different one for the afternoon. Then, enjoy a lovely Taizé service led by the Rev. Jeffrey Markay, or an enthralling Sacred Storytelling hour offered by Mary Murphy. And of course, the wonderful Saturday evening

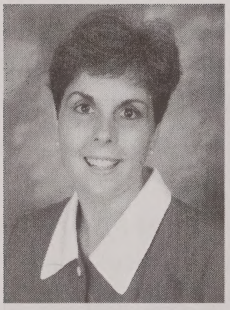
program features keynote speaker Joan Borysenko, followed by a concert of blissful chants and songs in the Hindu tradition, sung by the ecstatic Suzin Green and her musicians.

Also, in answer to so many of your requests from the first conference, we've built in lots of times and gathering places (all air conditioned) for "schmoozing"—getting to make new friends and "companions on the sacred journey"—from your own home county to the wide, wide world (last time we even had a priest from the Solomon Islands!) This will be a unique opportunity to exchange views, feelings, experiences, insights, and prayers with women and men from other faith traditions and other parts of the country and world.

Another plus we've added to this year's conference—as you'll see in the brochure—is the opportunity to stay in Princeton University's newest dormitory for only $35 a night. Again, as with the workshops, space is limited and will be allocated on a first come, first served basis. So I urge you to send in the registration form in the conference brochure just as soon as you can.

Blessings and joy to you. I hope to see you in June!

GOOD GUIDES



Last week my daughter saw some girls dressed in long skirts riding bikes. She looked puzzled then asked, "Wait, are they Jewish?" They were, and in that moment her curiosity led us into a conversation on beliefs and customs and self-identity. Curiosity, when coupled with respect, can be a good guide to questions and friendships we might otherwise miss.

When I picked up *Common Prayers: Faith, Family, and a Christian's Journey Through the Jewish Year*, by Harvey Cox, I discovered a curious and respectful guide. Cox, a professor at Harvard University is featured in this month's interview.

Michael Christensen's article is meant to whet your appetite for his and other workshops to be offered at our "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference coming soon in June. Donna Devlin, Jon Sweeney, and Diane Esterly separately probe the agonies, sacred questions, and mercies that surround the deaths of those we most love. Lucki Melander Wilder describes her pilgrimage to the shrines visited by Bahá'ís worldwide. Ellen Schmidt tells of an icon retreat where she discovered awe, paintbrush in hand. Our poets, Corrine DeWinter and Ann Horn, turn words into prayers that shine and bloom.

May you find the guides you need right where you live.

Plan Now to Join Us In Princeton for the Second

COMPANIONS ON THE SACRED JOURNEY

Conference June 14, 15, and 16, 2002

Keynote speakers will be:

Dr. Gerald (Jerry) May,
spiritual director, psychiatrist and widely-read author of *Addiction and Grace, Care of Mind/Care of Spirit,* and *The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need*

and

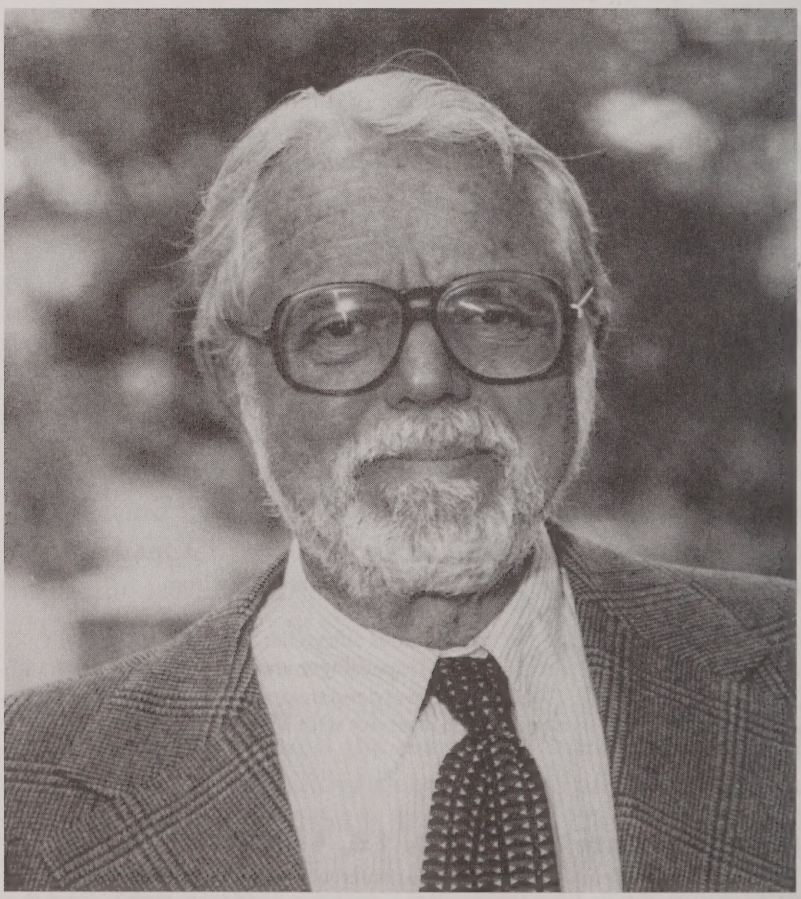
Joan Borysenko,
a leading authority on women's spirituality and author of best-selling books, *A Woman's Book of Life, Minding the Body/Mending the Mind, A Woman's Journey to God,* and *Seven Paths to God: The Ways of the Mystic*

PLUS
15 workshops to choose from
AND
the fabulous storyteller, Mary Murphy; the rousing Gospel singer and teacher, Sister Alice Williams; a lovely and inspiring Taize service; a dynamic Shabbat service with Marcia Prager; and
MUCH MORE!

Save the Date! June 14, 15, 16, 2002

Subscribers and attendees at *last* year's conference will receive a brochure, registration form and complete details by the the end of March 2002.
To be added to the list, e-mail us at **heck@sacredjourney.org.** or write to us at 291 Witherspoon Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08542-3227.

Harvey Cox



Mary Lee/Harvard News Service

A Baptist in the Synagogue

Harvey Cox

Harvey Cox is a widely respected scholar of religion and the Thomas Professor of Divinity of Harvard University and the author of the bestsellers The Secular City, Fire From Heaven, *and a dozen other influential books. Cox has for decades written on the peculiar ways we are religious people. In his most recent book,* Common Prayers: Faith, Family, and a Christian's Journey Through the Jewish Year, *Cox becomes what one reviewer has called "a guide to a religion that is not his own." Few others could write such a book with insight, clarity, and care. This is not a book of comparative religion, rather it goes beyond discussing beliefs and steps inside the Jewish tradition as it is practiced today by those Cox loves.*

For fifteen years, Cox has been married to Nina Tumarkin, a professor of Russian history, and participated in her Jewish faith community. Cox's wife and their son take him weekly into the ritual life of Shabbat prayers on Fridays, and shul on Saturdays while his own Christian faith takes him to the Baptist church on Sundays. Cox says, "I am probably a better Christian and my wife believes she may be a better Jew not in spite of but because of our marriage." The book is a rare mix of elegant theological reflection and vivid descriptions of spiritual practice. If you simply wish to know more about Judaism or what it means to live out your personal faith while others you love believe or pray differently, read this book. You will find no finer or kinder guide than Harvey Cox.

In your book *Common Prayers* you talk about living as a Christian in the Court of the Gentiles. What do you mean by that?

The Court of the Gentiles was the large area in the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem (destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.) that stood between the outer walls and the smaller central structure that contained a space open only to male Jews and, inside that central edifice, the Holy of Holies into which only the high priest could enter and then only once a year on Yom Kippur. The Court of Gentiles, however, was open to everyone. Gentiles could not only enter but could arrange for a sacrifice to be made.

As the Christian husband of a Jewish wife I have entered into Jewish worship and practice on a regular basis for fifteen years. That experience gave rise to my book *Common Prayers*. I feel that I live in a kind of metaphorical Court of the Gentiles. I am a participant-guest, warmly welcomed but not party to the inmost chambers. I like that position. I think every religion needs both its own "inner sanctum," which can be fully appreciated only by those on the inside, and also a welcoming nearby, indeed, environing space.

What have you found to be some of the greatest differences and commonalities between Judaism and Christianity?

We are so close, and yet so far. Strangely, fifteen years of participation in Jewish life has convinced me that Judaism really is a different religion. We may be sisters or cousins, but we are different, and that difference must be respected. The main difference that has struck me is the enormous emphasis on "peoplehood" in Judaism. Jews are first of all a people, and secondly a people with a

particular faith tradition (though that tradition has helped make them a people). Christianity is by definition open to all nations and people. It is first of all a faith.

For this reason, perhaps, beliefs are significant to Judaism, but not nearly as central as they are to most branches of Christianity. Also the emphasis in many parts of Christianity on a "personal relationship with God" does not have a central place in Judaism. Central rather is the experience of a whole people with God over many, many centuries. This is why Jewish prayers of repentance include so many lists of sins; they are repenting not just for themselves but for a whole people!

Continuing the peoplehood from one generation to the next is enormously central, indeed a spiritual obligation. For all the current Christian emphasis on "family values," the New Testament is more concerned about neighbor than about family. As the husband of a Jewish wife I had to learn that being in touch almost daily with different family members, by phone or other means, was considered normal, not excessive. This also explains the family-centeredness of Jewish rituals. The Sabbath meal (unlike Holy Communion) takes place at home. The Passover seder also takes place at home. Christians are more used to rituals that occur in the church building.

I think we have to go beyond comparing Christian "beliefs" with Jewish "beliefs." This does not get to the heart of the matter. The whole pattern is different.

Curiosity isn't always seen as an essential trait for the spiritual life, but you seem endlessly curious about the religious traditions of your Jewish family members. What role does curiosity play in appreciating religious traditions other than your own?

Many times I've been asked since the book came out "Isn't a relationship like yours possible because you are both scholars and devout and so on?" But I don't think this is true. We know people who do all kinds of work in life and who live out their differing religious commitments just as we do. What allows us to do this is first, genuine commitment to the spouse. To try to appreciate what makes him or her unique certainly includes understanding the spiritual tradition that has contributed to their life.

A normal level of human inquisitiveness is also necessary. How can you love someone and not wonder: Why is it that you have candles and bread on Friday nights? A child might notice in class that one's Jewish classmates are not there on Yom Kippur or Rosh ha-Shanah. Curiosity is an important element in being human. And I think your question raises a more serious one. Are we, in our society, anaesthetized by the huge information flow we experience each day, especially by the visual media? Is keeping track of information dulling our natural curiosity? I think being inquisitive is a part of being human. Watch a little kid see something and crawl over and pick it up to see what it is. That's what makes us who we are. Asking big questions about life is what religious traditions are all about. Who are we meant to be? What is the good life? Questions about those things are at the heart of religion and of life.

You are raising your son as a Jew. How do you, a Christian father at home and a theologian at work, see your role in his religious education?

My wife and I decided that our son would be raised Jewish because he is the child of a Jewish mother. I think

that in a Jewish-Christian marriage one has to respect the Jewish understanding of peoplehood. A child born to a Jewish mother is by definition a Jew. I was in favor of raising him that way, but only if I could have an active role in his religious training. One of the richest elements in this marriage, and there are many, is learning along with him of what it means for him to be Jewish. This continues to be very exciting. A high point came a couple of years ago as my son Nicholas was preparing for bar mitzvah. I was learning a little Hebrew with him as he was going once a week to prepare the Torah portion he had been assigned to read and would have to comment on.

I think it is hard to raise a child in any religious tradition, mine, yours, somebody else's. You are swimming against the tide, aren't you? We live in a very secular and materialistic society. You are raising a child with an alternative world view, which is what all religions have in common. The fact that so much of Christianity derives and grows out of, or stems from, the Jewish tradition helps, although they remain very different faiths. I think it would be much more difficult to raise a child as a Buddhist or Hindu. The whole rabbinical tradition from the first century is enormously important, and while Christians like me are familiar with the Old Testament, many feel, if they know the Old Testament, that is all there is to know about Judaism. There have been, of course, two thousand years of Judaism since the New Testament was written, and raising our son has been a quick study, a brush-up, and a continuing education for me. I am not at all regretful. It has been challenging and very rewarding. Remember that there are fourteen million Jews in the world, but there are nearly two billion Christians. For me, to help produce a new participant in this ancient commonwealth has been a privilege.

From *Common Prayers* by Harvey Cox

Little by little, I have come to recognize that when Jews pray they are doing some of the same things we Protestants do when we pray, but they are doing other things as well. When Jews pray, like us, they are communicating with God. But prayer also reminds them of who they are as a people. It links them to a tradition that goes back thousands of years. When praying in Hebrew, Jews immediately sense their kinship with Jews around the world, as well as with Jews in previous centuries. Also, as I adjusted to the Jewish way of praying, I recognized that my deep suspicion of "people who pray in words they don't understand" was a distinctly Protestant bias. Russian, Ethiopian, and Armenian Orthodox Christians all pray in archaic languages. Even I myself, when I sing Mozart's Requiem or Bach's B Minor Mass, although by now I understand nearly all the words, sense the strange power of praying in a language other than the vernacular. Praying with Jews has helped me appreciate the more liturgical and formal prayers of branches of Christianity other than mine, like the Episcopalian and the Lutheran. I no longer harbor the condescension I picked up as a child for people who "pray out of a book."

Still, there is something to be said for the spontaneous, free-form prayers I grew up with. For many Christians, the Jesus through whom we pray to God is often thought of as a friend, and we do not need to open a book and find the right page to make known our hopes and pains to a friend. It may well be that the most heartfelt prayers anyone ever utters are exclamations like "Please God, make it stop hurting" or "Thank God he wasn't on *that* plane." Still, even Jesus taught his followers a prayer that we repeat often, word for word. And when Jesus prayed with his dying breath, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" it was a prayer "out of a book," the book of Psalms. In short, what I have learned is that there are many different ways of praying. I doubt that God cares very much which one we practice.

From the book entitled Common Prayers *by Harvey Cox. Copyright © 2001 by Harvey Cox. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.*

Two Jewish holidays, Yom ha-Shoah and Yom ha-Atzma'ut, were added to the Jewish calendar in the twentieth century and take place in April. Tell us what observing these holidays taught you.

These are not easy holidays because they are not holidays that have become central to the American Jewish community let alone those outside of the community. More attention is paid to the holocaust remembrance day, Yom ha-Shoah.

I think the main thing about remembering the holocaust is remembering that something happened that was avoidable. It was not fated. It was caused by certain persons and causes. We must ask the question: How do we avoid allowing such things in the future? I think we have come to the point where breast-beating is not the most productive way of responding. Because of the role Christians and Christianity, alas, played in laying the culture and in the actual execution of the European holocaust, apologies do not mean much unless something else happens and the next step is taken. Jews and Christians must talk with each other, and be constantly on the watch in very practical ways for danger signs. Part of this is scrutinizing the readings and liturgies we have in Christian churches. We need to purge them whenever possible of anti-Jewish references.

As for Israel's independence, which is celebrated as Yom ha-Atzma'ut, this continues to be a big issue for me. I think it is time to revisit the original mandate for the creation of Israel and recognize that the absolutely dismal state of things in Israel can be overcome. I have a new sense that in the American Jewish community it is now possible to both be loyal to Israel and critical, when necessary, of Israel's present leadership. Even ten years

ago, it seemed that to be publicly critical of Israel's leadership was seen as a betrayal. That is not the case now. There are many people in the Jewish community who are thinking of new ways to move ahead. There are plenty, too, in Israel, but they don't get much media attention.

The main thing I see myself as a Christian doing is to be informed by those Israelis and American Jews and others who are seeking to find a just and permanent homeland for Palestine that allows for the integrity and security of Israel. We are at a point where we may have to acknowledge that the leadership on both sides is inadequate for the task. We may have to wait a few years for the next generation of leaders to emerge. These will be terribly painful years. Many will be hurt and killed. The hatred is stoked, but this is not a time to give up. It is a time to keep thinking and hoping that we can work together.

I go to Israel and Palestine every year to work with a group of scholars at the Hartman Center where Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars are brought together to work with each other.

Regular engagement with scholars of other traditions is a fortunate thing. What suggestions for action and dialogue might you give to those who aren't placed in interfaith settings through work or family?

I think you do have to find actual people. There may be some small towns or communities where that is very hard, I realize that. However, it is becoming easier everywhere. You don't have to go very far nowadays to find a Hindu congregation, a mosque, or a Jewish congregation. We often can take our cues from our children who are on athletic teams or are lab partners with children of other faiths. Increasingly our children are seeing those of other faiths socially and many are marrying each other. Today about fifty percent of people

who are Jewish in the United States marry someone who is not Jewish. The same may be true soon of Muslims. It certainly is true of Catholics and Protestants.

A few weeks ago my wife suggested we invite a family to our house as our sons play in the same band. We had them over for a wonderful, warm evening. They are Muslims and we are a Jewish/Christian family. Now, we had to take the initiative to do this. This was not going to happen without someone taking action. We did and now consider them our friends and will be seeing them again.

I think it is a spiritual responsibility to build relationships in a time like ours where we have both the opportunity and we face the menacing possibility of interreligious tensions here and around the world. We can't really ignore that. We have to build the bridges before the floods come. We pray that the floods don't come, but the bridges need to be built anyway. I think this is more than tolerance or civic duty, this is a spiritual responsibility.

In these days of unrest and wars, do you think people are more willing to reach out across faith lines or has fear made more of us want to retreat?

I'm very gratified to say that I feel there is more of a willingness to reach out, to listen, to find out about other people and faiths. Books about Islam are flying off the shelves. I wish I had written one! Instead of closing out other religions, I think many American are willing to find out and ask: What is this other religion, Islam, that is the second largest in the world? I think this says something important about the United States. After September 11th, we did not have a whole lot of anti-Arab protests in the streets. There were a few regrettable incidents, but by and large, I think we passed the test of being a multi-cultural society pretty well.

My last question has to do with spiritual identity. What helps you maintain your life of faith when you live and work with others who don't practice or believe as you do?

I strongly believe that one should have a personal spiritual discipline, whatever it might be and regularly practice it. I can tell you what I do. I start the day by reading a few verses from the Bible since that is my tradition. I pray a morning prayer as soon as I get up. I keep a little icon near my bed right at the window so I can look out and see the world. My prayer has a whole series of things I say and it varies a bit from week to week in its pattern. That is a must for me.

There is another thing, and this may amuse you, but since our house is a Jewish and Christian home, we have a lot of visual things around, and while I did not like such things in earlier years, now I like it that we have an icon of the theotokos, the mother of God, in our dining room. My wife is a professor of Russian history, and she picked this up one time. When I am going through the dining room, which is also the room where our son does his homework, I stop and say a short prayer. We also have *mezuzahs* [small prayer scrolls] on all our doors. When I go in and out of a room, I touch the mezuzah and thank God for my home, my family, and my neighborhood. I have a little visual symbol here, too, in my office where you have reached me today. I touch it and thank God for another day of work. These visual reminders of the spiritual dimension of life have become more important to me as I have gotten older. I think we all need them, at least I know I do. I also need regular participation in a spiritual congregation.

Spiritual Brothers:

Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen

Michael Christensen

I remember as a youth in the 1970's feeling drawn to the experience of contemplative silence. An introvert at school, I felt more energized alone in my room listening to Simon and Garfunkel's "Sounds of Silence," reading *Walden Pond*, composing poems and writing in my journal, than in playing baseball outside with neighborhood kids or socializing with school friends.

In 1979 while attending Yale Divinity School I met Henri Nouwen, Catholic priest and the author of many books on the spiritual life who taught me: "Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life." I took his course on Desert Spirituality at Yale Divinity School and learned

Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca Laird, our editor, will lead a workshop "Merton and Nouwen as Spiritual Brothers" at the "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference to be held June 14-16, 2002. Michael Christensen, Ph.D. teaches comparative spirituality at the Caspersen School for Graduate Studies at Drew University and directs the Doctor of Ministry Program in the Theological School.

that "solitude is the furnace of transformation." Solitude, he taught, is the spiritual environment we find or create in ourselves where we can be silent. It is neither loneliness or privacy, but rather aloneness and intimacy with God. He wrote in *The Way of Solitude*, "In solitude I get rid of the scaffolding: no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract, just me—naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken—nothing."

By embracing my "nothingness," by confronting the distractions that disturbed my quietude, and by persevering over a period of months, my desert of temptation slowly became a paradise of contemplative prayer.

Henri became my spiritual mentor and remained so until his death in 1996. Through him, I was introduced to Eucharistic worship, contemplative spirituality, and compassionate ministry. He taught me how to pray with icons by finding and entering the hidden door. Upon graduation from seminary, he advised me to check into a Trappist Monastery to "let your mind descend into your heart and there stand before God." It was with Henri that I had processed important life decisions (starting a new church, getting married, moving to Drew University). He favored me by coming to preach to my thirty-member house church in San Francisco. He donated generously to the work I was doing in that city. When I married, Henri sent us a Byzantine icon of Jesus. When each of our daughters was born, he sent a guardian angel to hang on the Christmas tree. Two months before he died, he dined at our home in New Jersey. Henri was a spiritual father to me. There is no person in the world who has had more influence on my adult spirituality, and I am proud to be numbered among his 1500 documented closest friends!

But the disciple is never greater than his master, and just as Henri was my mentor, Thomas Merton was Henri's.

Nouwen considered Merton his senior in the disciplined life of silence. He felt a deep affinity with the older man, and wrote *Pray to Live*, one of his first books, on Merton's approach to contemplative prayer. Nouwen met Merton only once, in 1967, while on a short retreat at Gethsemani. What made a profound impact on Nouwen is briefly mentioned in Merton's journal but Merton records the name incorrectly as "Fr. Nau." Merton died before Nouwen began to publish, so the influence flowed in one direction.

Merton grew up non-conformist in France, England, and America, was converted and baptized at New York City's Corpus Christi Church, and became a famous teacher, writer, monk, hermit, novice master, prophet, and pilgrim in the silent Trappist tradition. In *The Silent Life* Merton simply and beautifully (if too romantically) articulates "what is a monk" in relation to the vocation of solitude, silence, and stability of commitment to contemplation in a world of action.

> A monk is [one] who seeks God because he has been found by God....He travels to God by the direct path, *recto tramite*. He withdraws from "the world." He gives himself entirely to prayer, meditation, study, labor, penance, under the eyes of God....the monk gives up his own will, his power to own property, his love of ease and comfort, his pride, his right to raise a family, his freedom to dispose of his time as he pleases, to go where he likes and to live according to his own judgment. He lives alone, poor, in silence.

These lofty ideals and romantic notions articulated by Merton attracted Nouwen in a powerful way. He felt called to monastic disciplines, took priestly vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and made multiple attempts to live in contemplative monasteries. Yet Nouwen failed to find lasting peace in prolonged silence. He resisted the discipline of silence and even rebelled against the standards of the contemplative tradition as he found his own way home. Many of us can relate to Henri's adventurous journey toward an alternative, more active, and less austere model of authentic Christian spirituality.

One of the reasons Nouwen identified with and admired Merton is that he perceived a similar struggle in Merton in relation to the silent life. As Nouwen records in *The Genesee Diary:*

> Merton's deep desire for solitude had been in constant tension with his gregarious personality. There were always people around him, if not physically then through mail and books. And he loved it. But until the last days of his life he kept dreaming about a hermitage where he could be alone with God.

If Merton's struggle with balancing solitude and community was "in constant tension," Nouwen's struggle was tumultuous. During the first two weeks of his seven month monastic retreat, Henri confessed in his Genesee diary:

> I am impatient, restless, full of preoccupations, and easily suspicious. Maybe I just need to repeat this sentence very often and let it sink deep into my heart: "By waiting and calm, you shall be saved. In quiet and trust lies your strength." If these words could descend from my head into my heart and become part of my innermost self, I would be a converted man.

After the first month, Henri confessed disappointment with his slow progress in embracing the life of silence: "...solitude becomes really hard when you realize that nobody is thinking about you anymore."

Though people often favorably compare Merton and Nouwen and see them as spiritual peers, their differences loom large and are hard to reconcile, as Abbot of the Genesee Abbey, John Eudes Bamberger, who knew them both well has said, Merton was a "gregarious lover of solitude" and "had a strong sense of responsibility for his society," according to Fr. John. Nouwen was a "socialite" who was strongly attracted to the discipline and fruit of solitude.

Merton sought to relate his contemplative lifestyle to the needs of society and of people in the world. Nouwen needed to discover how someone so intensely involved with counseling, preaching, teaching, and ministering to people could cultivate a more developed interior life of prayer.

These two spiritual giants may inhabit the same spiritual world and sought to communicate a similar message; but they represent two different approaches, two different sets of gifts, two spiritual types: Merton was a monk, Nouwen, a priest; Merton was intuitive, Nouwen, didactic; Merton wrote as a poet, Nouwen as a popularizer. Thus Merton is an active-contemplative, Nouwen, a contemplative-active.

The way to reconcile their differences and similarities is to recognize in each a distinct vocation and unique contribution to the contemplative tradition of silence.

Merton possessed poetic gifts to write in an elevated, intuitive, literary style that sought to communicate profound, mystical truths by inference and suggestion. Nouwen offered a more well-ordered presentation and effectively communicated his vision of truth to the masses in concise, well-structured, and systematic prose.

Merton had a more literary and elite audience. His truth is more mystical, Zen-like, metaphysically profound, and spiritually challenging.

Nouwen, with his more popular style and focus on the heart as the locus of human transformation, had a vast audience, inter-generational readership, international network, and unparalleled cross section of friends. According to one of Nouwen's biographers, Jurjen Beumer, Nouwen is currently the most widely read, recognized, and quoted writer in the English-speaking world in the area of Christian spirituality.

Henri was loved for his vulnerability, inclusiveness, and personal warmth. "What is most personal is most universal," he believed. "And the deeper you go, the more we are the same." To share what is most personal, to make your woundedness available as a healing resource for others, and to dig down deep into the soil of your own heart and offer the light you find there—this is the secret of Henri Nouwen's success as a priest, teacher, writer, and spiritual director. And Henri's engagement with the poor, marginalized, and the powerless as a "wounded healer" served as a source of healing in his own life.

Both men, from different perspectives, understood that the human heart is, as Nouwen writes, "the center of our being, and a part of God." It is a sacred space within us "where God dwells and we are invited to dwell with God." It is that place where humanity and divinity touch, the conjunction of heaven and earth, where the finite heart of humanity is mystically unified with the infinite heart of God.

Lament

Ida Donahay Devlin

O God, my God, Holy, Mighty, God
You know my pain, my sorrow, my helplessness, even before I am aware of them.
And they overwhelm me, I am covered and tossed and thrown around as if by sea waves
Holy, Mighty, God, my God.

I see my mother. She lies there in pain, begs for relief, and I can't help her. All I can do is tell her I'm trying. I try and it's not enough. It's still not enough. Not nearly enough.
O God, my God, it's not enough.

Where are You?
From her early days she loved You.
Where are You now?

Her eyes, once pale blue, now, are red and dim. She used to read Your word daily, God.
Now she can barely see at all.

Ida Donahay Devlin lives in central New Jersey where she is the director of religious education and serves on the altar guild of her church. She teaches, writes poetry and short stories, dabbles in several art forms, and has written a book of African folktales. Shortly after she wrote this lament her mother died.

Her feet walked in gardens, down hallways, in churches; she followed in Your ways, God.
Now, she can't get out of bed.

She taught children for thirty years. She laughed and told them stories, made them love literature, she was so articulate.
Now, her flesh is scabbed, her lip rots away, she can hardly speak.

Her hands—they shelled peas, canned tomatoes, wrote—now those hands tremble so much she cannot feed herself.
Her mind—once so quick, wanders.
O God, my God, her God, where are you now?

She gave me life, loved me, taught me, now she is helpless, alone. She suffers.
I am frustrated and angry! I want to scream and shout.
"It isn't FAIR! She doesn't deserve this!"
Where are You?
God, my God, O Holy and Mighty God.
Where are You?

Where are You?
Do You hear?
Do You see?
Do You care?
Where are You?

O God
O God
O God

Mom, Your Body is Sacred to Me

Jon Sweeney

Mother is no closer to death than the rest of us, but since she is nearing sixty, she thinks about it a lot more often.

We were on vacation in Italy last spring. My mother and father, my only brother and sister-in-law, and my wife and me. We had left the kids with the other grandparents for a special trip. Somewhere between Portofino and Parma we stopped for the night and found one of those ubiquitous, charming sidestreet cafes for dinner. As I sprinkled romano on my spaghetti alla vongole, Mother said, "I would like you to cremate me when I'm gone."

"Really?" my wife, Danelle, replied. I think Danelle was the only other person not chewing.

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"Yes, I think so," Mother said, "Dad and I have discussed it and we think cremation is best."

Since I was a child, my mother has always wanted to discuss serious issues. We were never a family for much frivolous talk. For instance, long before it was fashionable, my mother said to my brother and me (we were probably eight and ten): "Do you guys want to talk about sex?"

"Uh, not really."

"It's okay, we should talk about it," she said. And so we did. Again and again, or so, it seemed.

So, it was no great surprise for Mom to start a conversation about how we should dispose of her body when she stops breathing. It was typical dinner conversation.

"What do you think?" she said, looking at me.

"I don't like it," I said.

"Really? What about you?" she said, turning to my older brother.

"I don't agree with cremation," he said.

"Well, well. Isn't that interesting," Mom replied, rolling her eyes at my father sitting next to her.

My brother is a professor of church history at a mid-western seminary who does not often step out of that role. As it turned out, his objections to the idea of cremating my mother were based on an analysis of the opinions of the early church fathers and Christian tradition. He mentioned a few examples of what our theological forefathers thought of the idea.

My opinions were much less rational. "I just don't like it," I began. "It would seem wrong to incinerate your body when you die."

Mother said, "But I will be gone. You know that, of course. What was me will be departed."

"Yes and no," I said, still unsure of what I was saying. "Even if you accept that the body and the soul are completely distinct, and when the body stops functioning the soul lives on somewhere else—it is still wrong to obliterate the body of a person. Yours are the cheeks I have kissed, the hands I have held. There is a connection of some kind between our love and our bodies."

Mother was surprised that we would object. As it turned out, my parents had been discussing this issue with many of their long-time friends—spiritual/political conservatives, all of them—and they had all come to this decision together. One of their older friends, in fact, had recently passed away after a long illness and had delighted (literally) in planning his own cremation.

My parents' parents, who were young adults during the Great Depression, would never have considered cremation as an option. Much like my brother's opinion, my grandparents would object to cremation on traditional grounds. You just didn't do it if you were a Christian in America. Cremation was something done by atheists and Hindus, they thought.

Times have changed. My own conservative parents don't want anyone visiting their gravesites. And they desperately don't want open casket funerals.

"Dust to dust, that is what seems right," Mom said at dinner.

My parents are of a generation that has already watched its parents die. They didn't like the nursing home dirtiness of it, and they quietly vowed to make enough money so that—when their own time came—not only would they not bother their children as slow-dying financial burdens, but they would clean up the mess they left. A tidy urn.

Our passing conversation has stayed with me over the last several weeks. And so, I composed the following letter to my mother and father.

Dear Mom and Dad,

These are the reasons why I don't want to cremate you when you die. These are the reasons why I want to bury you in a simple way.

First, bodies are sacred.

We agree that life is fleeting—and I know that the older you become the more sensitive you become to this—but it is exactly because life is fleeting that our bodies are sacred. What you do with yours is much of what you leave here when you die. Our actions are sacred—or, have the potential to be sacred—as much as our meditations and prayers are so. Too often, I think, we assume that what we do 'in our heads' is more valuable than what we do in our bodies. What you do with your body is what you know to be true.

One of the many poignant stories that emerged from the World Trade Center disaster is that of a New York City Fire Department chaplain, a Franciscan. In the midst of the terror, while performing Last Rites to the dying, he was struck by flying debris and killed. When his body was discovered, the firefighters draped his body in a sheet and carried it to the nearby church where he lived. They placed him on the altar and gathered around to pray. His body was meaningful because what he did in it was also full of meaning.

Mom, when you take the hand of the old woman at the soup kitchen, and Dad, when you sing out strong your love for God, you are showing your bodies to be sacred places. Can you see, then, why your physical body remains meaningful to me after you are done with it—why I would like to at least show it respect as one might a holy book? You created a lot of meaning in there.

Medieval Christians were fanatical on this point. Holy relics of the saints were big business. Pilgrims would travel for months on foot to reach a cathedral or some other holy place where they could see, or even touch, one of the bones of the martyrs, or a drop of the Virgin Mary's blood, or some other piece of physical remembrance of someone's body. A few years ago, I saw an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum in New York of marble icons from a monastery in Egypt. I was struck when the tape-recorded guide pointed out the portions of the marble that appeared to have been rubbed off by hundreds of years of caressing and kissing the images. What devotion, I thought.

I don't want to keep your bones around so that I can touch and kiss them, but I can understand—and even admire—the emotion and passion behind these actions.

I like to have icons around our house. I also like to have pictures of your parents and grandparents around. I keep many books around, too—books that, in many cases, I read years ago and may not read in detail again. But I like to be around people like Kierkegaard, Teresa of Avila, Dostoevsky, and Flannery O'Connor. Who wouldn't? The people behind our images are reminders of who we want to be. After you are gone, I want to be around you when I can. I want to be reminded—not of who you were—but of who you are—because our lives here are fleeting, and like a work of art, we live on in ways that we do not know or even understand.

Second, I want to plant your bodies like seeds.

There is a cemetery a couple of miles from our house that the kids find fascinating. It is on Bunker Hill Road, just off the old King's Highway, which dates to the mid-eighteenth century. This old graveyard is one of the few places I know where you can stand for fifteen minutes and hear only natural sounds. Cars hardly ever drive by on the dirt road and there are no

houses within several thousand yards. The kids like the graveyard because they enjoy thinking through what death is all about. They read the gravestones carefully and think aloud about who the people might be who are buried there. We talk about the families that are buried there as if we knew them—the Howards and the Sewalls, for instance—and the relationships between the great-grandparents, the grandparents, the children, and the great-grandchildren. The bodies that are tucked in their coffins and placed snuggly in the ground there, are planted as memories and foundations for what might come in the future.

The New Testament, of course, says that the Lord will return and our bodies will be resurrected to meet him in the air. Christians have interpreted this passage literally for millenia. Medieval and Renaissance artists depicted realistic pictures of body parts emerging from the mouths of beasts, raising from the ground and the waters, and reassembling in the air on the way to the clouds. I have no such visions. But after you die, I will see your body as a planting, like a new tree, to create new, as-yet-to-be-determined, life. In the words of an ancient, Celtic Eucharistic prayer: "This is the day of resurrection."

Third, I would like to let God be God.

Even if we separate the soul from the body at death, your body remains the sacred vessel (not a 'prison', as some mystics have said) for your soul here on earth. It was composed out of the earth, as we know from Genesis, and to the earth it should return. Cremation takes into our hands what the earth can easily and fruitfully accomplish on its own, in its time.

An elegant woman in her 80s recently came to a talk that I gave. The subject of the talk was embodied prayer, and she was moved to introduce herself to me afterwards.

"I want to tell you a brief story," she said. "I have a very good friend who died last year. She is about my age and we

have been friends for decades. I know each of her nine children, and then their children. Most of her family still lives within easy driving distance of her home.

"The day that she died, her children gathered together in her home. They were not just sad, grieving. They washed her body." At this, the woman telling me the story began to cry.

"Her nine children encircled her body and washed it, lovingly. They told stories about their mother and they laughed and they cried. Then, someone called the funeral home and the hearse came to pick her up. The children, some of them in their sixties, carried their mother to the car and as it drove away to the funeral home, they stood in the street and waved."

Somewhere, William Blake said that dying was simply like passing from one room to the next. Blake died on his deathbed, singing, his biographers say. I believe that death is like that, too. And when it happens to you, I think you will soon find yourself in song.

Please don't worry about the mess you leave behind. I would like to be bothered with tending to it.

From A Distance

Diane Esterly

My Uncle Smitty was very ill. He had rallied from a near-fatal struggle with pneumonia and was now in a rehabilitative facility, stable but very weak. His spirits were good, and for a few days he made progress becoming stronger and looking forward to the day when he would go home. However, he hit a plateau and suddenly the optimism was gone. Smitty was a fighter, and he had overcome several health crises with determination, grit, and grace. We thought this was just another of those challenges.

I spoke to my Aunt Leah by phone the day before Easter and she said that Smitty had eaten most of his favorite supper. Although she was pleased to see him eat with an appetite again, he needed to rest twice just to have the strength to eat this simple meal. She had given him a pep talk because she felt he had given up. I talked to her about

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giving up versus acceptance. I suggested it might be a good idea if she could give Smitty permission to let go if he wanted to, assuring him that she would be all right.

I got off the phone with Leah but called again after a few minutes feeling I had to talk more about acceptance as a goal for her as well as for him. We talked a little about dying, suffering, and loss. I hung up the phone wishing with all of my heart that I were not five hundred miles away from my home town and Smitty.

The next morning was Easter. I got up very early and made coffee. Curiously, I felt compelled to go straight to the piano. I never play while others in my family are sleeping, but this morning I felt I did not have a choice. On the piano were three favorite hymns which I had copied to take with me the next time I volunteered at the nursing home. Since I loved these melodies, I didn't search for any other music, deciding to play what was handy. Again I felt the urge to play and pray for Smitty. I was aware that there were three hymns in front of me. Three is a sacred number and one I've been aware of for many, many years. It has woven its way through my life in a variety of meaningful ways over the years. I decided to play each hymn three times. I played without thought and without words. When I finished, I began again with the first one and sang softly. I wept. I realized that the words were absolutely perfect for Smitty right then. By following my heartfelt call to play and pray for Smitty I had been led to the perfect music. No thinking was necessary. First I sang, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord."

> Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand; I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on to the light; Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me on.

The second hymn was "In the Garden":

> I come to the garden alone. . . . and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses. And He walks with me, And He talks with me, And He tells me I am his own, And the joy we share, As we tarry there, None other has ever known.

Finally I sang, "I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked":

> I picked my heavy burden up, And with Him by my side, I climbed the hill of Calvary, I climbed the hill of Calvary, Where on the cross He died. I walked today where Jesus walked, and felt Him close to me!

When I finished, I lit a candle and sat quietly, not thinking. I watched the dawn break on this Easter morning and I felt grateful and humble. I knew my playing and praying had been heard by Smitty. A great peace enveloped me and I felt full of awe as the rhythm of the day began. I was drawn to the pulse of this Easter morning despite the concern and sadness, and I felt a wee Hallelujah begin to grow in me.

Much later that day I heard from Leah. My Uncle Smitty had died peacefully early that morning when I was praying and playing for him.

I believe that we are energy beings, that the world is one of vibration, that physical distance means nothing in terms of prayer and affairs of the heart, that death is not final, that the invisible world is real. Still, whenever I experience such deep connection, I find it profoundly moving and powerful. I hope I never become immune to wonder!

I will remember that Easter morning for many reasons. I will remember Smitty. I will remember how he chose to

let go of his life on such a wonderfully meaningful day. I will try to live with more certainty in my uncertainty, knowing that when I trust in myself I am trusting in the Wisdom that created me. I will try to remember to feel the fear but to go on anyway believing that I am enough. I will try to remember on that Easter morning I listened to my heart, acted on the call to play and pray from a distance, and felt my music was received. I will remember to try to always follow my heart to lead me to the place I am meant to be. I will remember to be grateful for being led to this wonderful path of playing healing music, wherever I find the need. I will remember that often the place I think I'll be needed is not where I'm led.

I was drawn into the pulse of this Easter morning.

Yes, I will remember this Easter morning for many reasons. Mostly, I'll remember Smitty, who loved life and people and gardening and golf and family and church and playing cards and visiting and traveling.

There is a Native American saying, "This is a very good day to die." Smitty chose well. He let go of this life on Easter and went on to a realm where suffering and pain are obsolete on a day whose message has been, "I live!"

Choosing to let go is difficult, but there can be no beginnings without endings, no rebirth without death. I feel blessed to have been a part of Smitty's last day. Praying my music does make a difference even, and maybe especially, from a distance.

ILLUMINATIONS

Going to extremes is never best.
For if you make a blade too sharp, it will become dull too quickly.
And if you hoard all the wealth, you are bound to be attacked.
If you become proud and arrogant regarding your good fortune, you will naturally beget enemies who jealously despise you.
The way to success is this: having achieved your goal be satisfied not to go further.
For this is the way Nature operates.

~Lao Tzu

Among the many Hebrew terms for spiritual practice is *avodah*, work. Spirituality is a discipline. When people say to me, "I'm a spiritual person," they often mean that they treasure some vague feeling of connection with God, nature, humanity that is most often divorced from any behavioral obligation. Spirituality is not a feeling, nor is it vague. Spirituality is a conscious practice of living out the highest ethical ideals in the concreteness of your everyday life. The disembodied spirituality so often spoken about by those who do not practice any spiritual discipline rarely obligates them to anything and often excuses the grossest behavior.

~Rabbi Rami Shapiro

The journey into the inner self is not just the important one, it is the only one. We need to listen to the sound beyond the silence.

~W.B. Yeats

Small Miracles in Sacred Places

Lucki Melander Wilder

In my early forties, and during the nineteenth year of my Bahá'í life, I received the wonderful bounty of starting pilgrimage on May 23rd, the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb, and was in the Holy Land to commemorate the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, on May 29th. I'd like to share with you two small, yet personally very meaningful, experiences from that time.

In the Shrine of the Báb

The white marble, golden-domed Shrine of the Báb—lauded in literature and song as "a Crown of Beauty" and "the Queen of Carmel"—stands halfway up Mount Carmel, directly above David Ben-Gurion Avenue, overlooking the harbor of Haifa. When the pilgrims gathered in near the Pilgrim House before going to the Shrine for the first time,

Lucki Melander Wilder lives in Chicago, Illinios. She writes to explain the context of her article: "Going on pilgrimage is both a privilege and an obligation for Bahá'ís who can undertake it. Formal pilgrimage covers nine days in the Holy Land. Among sites visited are the Shrine of the Báb—Herald of the Bahá'í Faith—in Haifa, and the prison cell, the last home, and the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh—its Prophet-Founder—in Acre. The Báb declared the dawning of a new divine dispensation on May 23, 1844. Bahá'u'lláh passed on May 29, 1892. Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son and heir, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, whom he called the Exemplar of the Faith, died in 1921 and is also buried at the Shrine of the Báb. Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'u'lláh's great-grandson was called the Guardian of the Faith till he passed on in 1957. "

we were reminded not to be judgmental about how each other showed respect at the Sacred Threshold. Such acceptance was a loving instruction from Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Faith, even though he always knelt in reverence.

I've never been a religiously demonstrative person. Furthermore, I have an arthritic knee. So I knew I wouldn't be kneeling in the Shrine. I felt, though, that many friends would wish to kneel. When I was ready to leave, I wanted to avoid wending my way through kneeling worshippers, possibly distracting or stumbling over them. I decided that, when I entered, I'd stand against the back wall, out of everyone's way yet near the door.

The tomb of the Báb is in the Shrine's central room, flanked by two anterooms, each of which can be seen from the other. Neither anteroom was large enough to accommodate the one hundred members of our pilgrimage group, so our group was arranged into two sections. Pilgrims who understood Persian, or Arabic, or a related Semitic language, were to go to the eastern anteroom with the Persian translator; pilgrims who understood English, or Spanish, or a related Romance language, were to go to the western room with our English-speaking guide and the Spanish translator. Thus, the Persian friends in our group went first along the path, because they had farther to walk to enter by the eastern door. The rest of us followed, to enter by the western door. For some reason, two other American friends and I walked faster than we realized, accidentally bypassing a number of Persians, and thus entered the western door well before anyone else in either room, even our pilgrimage guide. As planned, I did not kneel. Nevertheless, I found myself on my knees.

I didn't fall. I didn't become weak and sink to my knees.

Rey Wilder

Shrine of the Bab, Haifa, Israel

I felt no overt compulsion to kneel. I was not overwhelmed with sudden religious fervor. Nevertheless, though I do not—and expect I never will in this life—know how, I found myself on my knees.

I should have felt discomfort, at least physical, if not mental. I didn't. I felt awe and peace. I felt comforted. I felt right. I never noticed when my son, Rey Wilder, entered the Shrine soon afterwards. He later told me how dumbfounded he was to see me kneeling in the middle of the still mostly empty room. He was no more astonished than I. Even now, many years later, the memory still astounds me and still brings tears to my eyes.

In the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh

When friends in Chicago learned I'd be going to Haifa, many came to me to request prayers. There were also a number of people I wished to pray for at the Shrines. So one way I prepared for pilgrimage was to make a list of people and situations to pray for, then I researched in my favorite prayer book—the one I would carry with me, *Bahá'í Prayers*—for the most appropriate prayer for each item, and noted the page and opening words on my list. My annotated list covered a whole sheet of paper.

When I started my pilgrimage and learned how our itinerary would unfold, I decided to say as many list prayers as possible each time we visited the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. I hoped to finish the list in that manner during the nine days; if I couldn't, I'd certainly say the remaining prayers at the Shrine of the Báb before leaving Haifa.

The first time we entered the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, I was not one of the first people in this line. Still, after I had knelt—this time by choice—and prayed at the Sacred Threshold, I realized I still had time to make a good start on my prayer

list while my fellow pilgrims made their obeisances. So I went to the daised niche that offsets from the room, sat down against the wall, and started to pray.

Time passed, pilgrims entered and knelt and prayed, and gradually the line reached its end. Finally, we were called to leave the Shrine for that day. So I folded the prayer list back into my book, arose, and left with a singing heart, for I had just then finished the last prayer on the list. The timing was perfect.

I can't begin to describe how many lessons I learned on pilgrimage. But these two small and very personal experiences brought home to me the meaning of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations about miracles. He states in *Some Answered Questions* that even descriptions of the miracles performed by the Founders of Faiths:

> ...are not satisfactory proofs. Yes, miracles are proofs for the eyewitness only...they do not constitute proofs and evidences for all the peoples of the earth, and they are not decisive proofs even for those who see them...Our purpose is not to deny such miracles; our only meaning is that they do not constitute decisive proofs, and that they have an inner significance.

Some people agree with me that what I experienced on pilgrimage was in some small way miraculous. Others feel that what happened was easily explainable or mere coincidence. It doesn't matter; let each glean from my story what they will and what will have the most meaning for them on their own personal sacred journey. For the miracle of these experiences was in the inner significance they had, and still have, for me.

Prayers from Bahá'í Scripture

Bahá'í Scripture contains a wealth of prayers and meditations by the central figures of the Faith: The Báb; Bahá'u'lláh; and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. While Bahá'ís often use their own words in private prayer, they offer publicly spoken prayers only from the Holy Writings of the world religions. These are prayers Lucki Melander Wilder offered for her friends at the shrines.

For a family member who had suffered emotional trauma

O God! Refresh and gladden my spirit. Purify my heart. Illumine my powers. I lay all my affairs in Thy hand. Thou art my Guide and my Refuge. I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved; I will be a happy and joyful being. O God! I will no longer be full of anxiety, nor will I let trouble harass me. I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life.

O God! Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself. I dedicate myself to Thee, O Lord.

~Baha'u'llah

For a laid-off colleague who was job-hunting

O Lord! Unto Thee I repair for refuge, and toward all Thy signs I set my heart.

O Lord! Whether traveling or at home, and in my occupation or in my work, I place my whole trust in Thee.

Grant me then Thy sufficing help so as to make me independent of all things, O Thou Who art unsurpassed in Thy mercy!

Bestow upon me my portion, O Lord, as Thou pleasest, and cause me to be satisfied with whatsoever Thou hast ordained for me.

Thine is the absolute authority to command.

~The Báb

Brush With God

Ellen Schmidt

Retreat director and iconographer, Peter Pearson, tells us, the twelve Catholic sisters and lay women attending one of his icon painting retreats at the Lindenwood Retreat and Conference Center in Donaldson, Iowa, "We do not paint icons, we write them." At its core, iconography is not an individualistic creative process but a communal, prayerful one. The iconographer is a tool of the holy spirit who follows a pattern and a process in a collaborative event between God, the saint, and the iconographer.

When Peter hands out the tracing paper and supplies, I think , "Oh, that's a help, no freehand drawing." The voices in my head have been noisily reminding me, "You can't draw. You don't paint with a brush. You like abstracts. Paint an icon? Impossible."

I place the tracing paper over the pattern of Daniel, the Old Testament figure who is a mystic, an apocalyptic man of visions and dreams. I haven't traced anything since

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childhood and as I move the pencil, I recall reading Bible stories with my mother and smile. Daniel was one of my favorite Old Testament figures. Tracing the image, I enter the den in my mind. Lions lick my ankles and feet waiting to devour, to consume, to kill. Yet these lions also purr like kittens. Their licks are affectionate and loving. I am reminded of the human dilemma of ambivalence, the requirement to live with opposites. I recall that Christ has been called the "golden means" who heals the pain caused by contradictions. I face my own fears; the fear of intimacy, inadequacy, abandonment, illness, death—these are the lions in my den. I need Daniel who, in his vulnerable moment of facing certain death, trusted God.

I continue to trace; the paper slips, and even here in prayer there is no perfection. I miss lines. Peter Pearson, shepherd of this flock, stands in back of me and says, "You need lines here." "Thank you," I reply humbly. I do need to accept help and learn the lesson of reciprocal relationships.

Transferring the tracing over carbon onto the wooden board is the next step. Like following a map, this process has definite edges, order. This surprises the capricious inner child in me who prefers infinite freedom and has never desired boundaries. Now I befriend them; I have been wandering too long.

Removing the tracing paper, I cover the board with yellow ochre and mottle it with paper towels, leaving the board textured. I attack this phase with a vengeance. Peter remarks, "Remember, it is just a board."

We work silently for one entire day while Taizé chants meditatively caress each woman. We are connected yet separate. I find as I paint that my fears and self-consciousness leave and, like Daniel, I begin to trust—to be.

Body, mind, and spirit unite; equanimity smiles. It is rare to be focused, to be present not in the future or past but in the moment.

I pray with my body, wordlessly catapulted into heavenly realms. There is rhythm and joy. I rise like the Phoenix daring to do the impossible: to create with God an icon that opens into eternity. Henri Nouwen writes, ". . . these icons will . . . become yours and they can guide you by day and by night, in good times and bad, when you feel sad and when you feel joyful. They will begin to speak of the unique way God has chosen to love you . . . Icons are created for the sole purpose of offering access, through the gates of the visible, to the mystery of the invisible. Icons are painted to lead us into the inner room of prayer and bring us close to the heart of God."

I came to this retreat a stranger to icon writing. I begin to realize that I will return home from the retreat no longer a foreigner, but as a woman with boundaries and discipline and a renewed spirit.

I feel it was no accident that Peter chose the image of Daniel for this retreat. Perhaps Peter's choice is an example of synchronicity, of unexpected connections. The world is in the throes of an electronic transformation. Old institutes and values are crumbling. The age of Sophia wisdom, a time that trusts ancient feminine knowing, hopefully is being born. The message of Daniel is that people of faith can resist temptation and conquer adversity. Daniel tells us that even in times of distress and persecution we can trust that the kingdom of God will ultimately triumph.

During the last day of the four-day icon retreat I tell Peter, "I really want to leave the image alone." Peering at Daniel's blank face, I say, "The icon is perfect just the

way it is." Peter replies, "It is a process. Forget perfectionism. You need to complete the painting in its entirety."

I say, "I'll ruin it for sure."

"Only if you think negatively will you ruin it," he says.

I try to paint the eyes, two dots with white on either side. How hard can this be? The black acrylic paint smears. I put saliva on my paint brush and try to rub out the smears. I try again. One black dot falls below the line giving poor Daniel a look of bewilderment. The shadows on his face, which I meticulously lined, create an effect of Indian war paint. How will I remove the paint delicately? I touch the paintbrush to the tip of my tongue and try rubbing again. Peter rescues me. "No problem," he says and takes the brush to add the first face tone, an olive green. This color slides over the cheeks not obliterating the shadows, but leaving just the right trace. Peter reshapes the eyes. "See," he remarks, "it was all there." I admire the restored face.

In the background, a cassette tape is playing Ave Maria. This seems to be a holy moment. I pause and accept Peter's help with gratitude.

I wash the brushes, dip into the varnish can, and stir the contents with a spatula and begin to spread the varnish. The sides of the board are smoothed and the surface is butterflied with even strokes applied in the same direction. The colors are protected and gleam with intensity. The halo is brilliant. We elevate the twelve finished icons on paper plate stacks and leave them to dry.

"I did it!" I congratulate myself silently.

"Praying with icons requires living with icons," writes Charles Hoffacker.

Looking at the face of the icon I pray, *Daniel, you are the*

seer, the prophet, the dreamer. May I choose you this day to lead me into mystery, not seeking answers but beholding, honoring, reverencing the imminent, transcendent Christ who loves.

The words of the ancient poet Saicho fill my mind:

"What dwelleth here
I know not
but my heart is
full of awe
and the tears trickle down."

Ellen Schmidt with her icon

The Blue Between the Clouds

Corrine DeWinter

Prayers wait patiently
In the hollows of trees,
In the blue between clouds,
At a long red light.
They wait patiently
In the warm, quick heartbeats
Of small animals and infants.
They wait for a mouth to form them,
For a heart to give them life.
They are unmined jewels
Ready to shine.

Prayer

Ann Horn

Weary,
not much to say,
thoughts strewn,
yet offered as
prayer.

Please
garland them, Lord,
as blossoms
into a lei of
praise.

A frequent contributor to SACRED JOURNEY, *Corrine DeWinter's poems have appeared nationwide, as well as in Canada and England, in publications such as* The Pinehurst Journal, Odyssey, Westwords, Mobius, *and* Plainsongs.

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